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DECORATIVE ART IN PARIS.

By THEODORE CHILD.

In the report of the International Jury of the Exhibition of 1878, on the class of furniture, both cheap and *de luxe*, the reporters record with regret that they had not found twenty really original pieces of furniture in the whole of the French section. All the exhibits were either copies or reminiscences, with a tendency towards the curious. The styles of Henry II, Louis XIII, Louis Quatorz, and even the Neo-Greek style of the Empire, were in vogue next to the Renaissance. At the Exhibition of 1868 it seemed as if Louis XVI. were to triumph. Now, after a period of fourteen years, we have another very important furniture exhibition at the Exposition de L'Union Centrale des Arts Decoratifs. The designers have had time to profit by the lessons of the Universal Exhibition where they saw their English, Belgian and Austrian rivals, formerly their faithful pupils, gradually emancipating themselves and producing a style of furniture that had a decidedly national stamp about it. I refer not so much to the resuscitation and adaptation of the early English and Queen Anne styles in England, due to the artificial impulse of the esthetic movement, as to the solid and finely made furniture of Belgian and Austrian makers, handsome in design, sober, almost severe, in ornament, but artistic, useful and eminently suited to modern requirements and in harmony with the houses which it was intended to furnish. The fact was, that since 1867, the Belgian and Austrians had founded art schools and schools of design in profusion. Designs had become a living and actual thing in those countries. Whereas, in France how do matters stand? It is only within the past year people have begun to talk of making drawing an obligatory subject in school programmes. Outside of Paris there are not half-a-dozen art schools in the whole country. At Paris itself there exist only two schools specially devoted to decorative art, the "Ecole Nationale des Arts Decoratifs, which is still in its infancy and struggling against poverty, and a trade institution, a sort of apprentice school, called the "Patronage Industriel des Enfants de l'Ebenisterie." I will not stay to

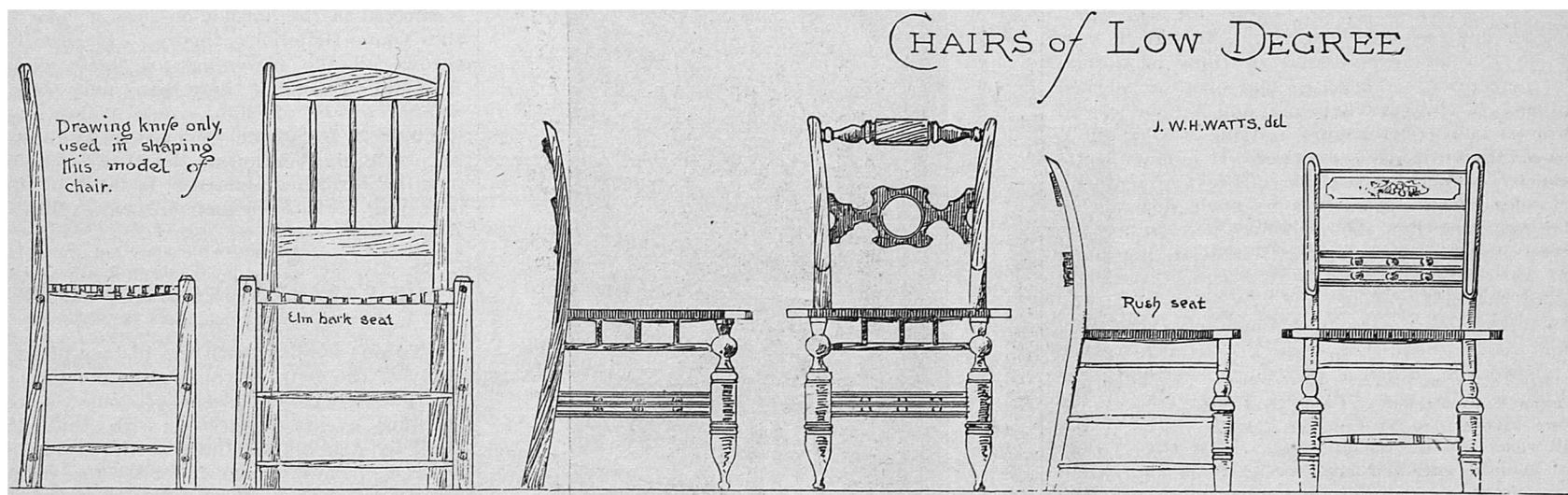
country in which it is situated, and to make your furniture and fittings with the woods of the country. In that way you will have it in harmony not only with itself, but with its natural surroundings. Is not this the explanation of the charm of the Swiss chalet, of the Norwegian wooden houses, of the marble palace as well as the thatched?

On the other hand the French cabinet makers, with their fine wood, fine carving, and fine workmanship, continue to imitate the models of the past. Many of the first Parisian houses devote themselves purely and simply to reproduction. One house has a specialty of Louis XIV, XV, XVI and reproduces the incrustations of Boulle and the chiselled bronzes of Gouthière with such exactitude, that a hundred years hence it will be impossible to tell the original from the copy; another house makes a specialty of reproducing the Gothic and Renaissance models preserved in the Cluny Museum; another makes a specialty of chairs of all epochs. Thus one may see in the retrospective exhibition, up-stairs, the originals, and down-stairs the reproductions. No praise is too high for these reproductions; they are fac-similes of the originals in workmanship as well as appearance. The men who turn out this work are artists, beyond a doubt, and archaeologists to boot, witness M. Pecquereau for instance who contributes to the retrospective exhibition a most interesting and complete exhibition of chair models, from the Renaissance up to the beginning of this century. Still, while the French artists have in this exhibition once more given proof that they are first in execution, they must be aware that the only real and durable superiority is that which is due to originality. M. Jules Simon, in his admirable introduction to the reports of the International Juries of 1878, told his countrymen as much when he said: "The royalty of fashion is not to be kept by imitation, however perfect it may be. You must invent in order to lead." And all this, be it added, is an encouragement to rival nations, and particularly to young nations, to take advantage of their natural energy and ingenuity, and to push ahead. The material exists, both human and natural, it requires only to be formed, and the way to form the human material is to educate it, to establish schools of design everywhere, to establish libraries of art books, to establish museums of decorative art. Here is indeed a noble and useful way for the American millionaires to spend their money, and certainly a better means of commend-

holstery tissues are, of course, susceptible of infinite variety. I can only say that from an artistic point of view the products exhibited are admirable, bold in design and color, and invented with a fine sentiment of decorative art.

The foreign visitor may be surprised to find hardly any carpets exhibited in the modern section of the Decorative Arts Exhibition. From their very nature, the manufacture of carpets does not lend itself to innovation. The specimens now exhibited comprise Aubusson, Moquettes or Brussels carpets and printed felts. In point of fact carpet manufacturing is not of great importance in France, where, thanks to parquet floors, carpets are little used. The room floors are covered in very few houses, and the only carpets generally found are hearth and bedside rugs and, during the last ten years, Eastern rugs, which are now thrown in abundance on the Paris market. In the retrospective department are exhibited a few splendid smooth carpets from the Savonnerie, the first royal carpet manufactory founded at the Louvre in 1604, and which since 1828 has formed part of the Gobelins Tapestry Manufactory. The Savonnerie carpets, with their exquisite texture, and their velvety, melting tints are still manufactured at the Gobelins, but as they cost about 3,000 francs a square metre there is no great demand for them. The designs of these old Savonnerie carpets are cold and formal, and full of incongruous objects and ornaments. Oddly enough it is to the Revolution that we owe a reform in the Savonnerie design. In 1794 a jury of arts, nominated by the Committee of Public Safety, devoted sixteen sittings to examining the designs of the Savonnerie, and at the end proposed a prize for a new design. The programme said: "Artists will be careful not to present in their projects any but pronounced forms, simple and grand in taste, and not to mix with them human figures, which it would be revolting to trample upon in a government where man is recalled to his dignity."

In the Oriental rooms are a few of those priceless old Persian carpets, real pieces of smooth velvet, showing, as it were in the shimmering of hoar frost, flowers, fantastic animals and Persian characters of the Sixteenth century, woven in the delicate brightness of silver, green, gold, lapis-lazuli, blue or amaranth. There are, too, other Eastern carpets with inimitable charm of color and inexhaustible



A SERIES OF SUGGESTIONS FOR CHAIRS.—NUMBER ONE.

explain this state of affairs due in a large extent to the traditions of a paternal government, and the consequent absence of private initiative in France. What more striking proof of this phenomenon than the fact that a lottery is found to be the only means of obtaining the necessary funds for erecting a French South Kensington Museum?

But to return from this digression. Does the present exhibition of furniture in the Palace de l'Industrie give any indications of the creation of a style that is to characterize the Nineteenth century? In answering this question we must make a distinction between cheap furniture and furniture *de luxe*. In the cheap furniture there is nothing to be noticed except the increased use of pine, bamboo and coarsely carved oak. The bedsteads continue the same in shape as they were a century ago, simple French bedsteads with straight or arched head and footboards, made of veneered mahogany or rosewood or inferior walnut. Brass bedsteads are not in favor in France, and only the very commonest kinds of iron bedsteads are used. French cheap furniture, with the exception of the pine furniture, remains poor in workmanship, unartistic in form, uncomfortable and made for show. For that matter the nature of French middle and lower class dwellings is such, and the way of living of the people so little favorable to home life, that progress in the construction of cheap artistic furniture is likely to be slow.

With the furniture *de luxe*, the case is different. The demand for fine work is constantly increasing, and no cabinet-maker who produces an elegant piece of furniture will find any difficulty in disposing of it. But as for the characteristic style of the Nineteenth Century, it has not yet made its appearance. In the present exhibition, as in the International Exhibition of 1878, the French makers, in default of originality, show careful workmanship, good material, and continual progress in taste proven by the absence of crude color, by correctness of line and sobriety of ornament. Veneering has been entirely given up. The French cabinet makers work honestly in solid woods, and what is more they work in the native woods of France, oak, pear, and walnut particularly. This matter of wood is worth taking into consideration. It is sound doctrine, though rarely followed, to build a dwelling with the products of the

ing their glory to posterity than juggling with railway-stock and building mausoleums.

To conclude this brief general review of the furniture *de luxe* exhibited at the Palais de l'Industrie, I must notice the large use made of embroidery, and of applications of embroidery on plush. While the cabinet makers remain imitators of the Renaissance and Louis XIV. styles, the two styles most in vogue for the moment, the modern upholsterers and decorators have almost created a characteristic Nineteenth Century style in their treatment of hangings and of wholly upholstered furniture. The Parisian *tapisier* gathers up, crumples and rumples plush, broché silks, lampas, satins and the scores of rich tissues that Lyons is continually turning out, with an art, a grace, an indescribable *chic* that can only be compared to the *chic* of the Parisian modistes and dressmakers. He knows how to make the boudoir of a Parisienne of to-day a fitting frame for the Parisienne of to-day. The stuffs, the cords, the fringes, the tassels are at the disposal of the *tapisier* all the world over; but it requires the French artist to drape them in the modern manner, a manner which is neither noble, nor majestic, nor beautiful, perhaps, nor even useful, but simply *chiffonné* or crumpled, but *chiffonné* with a grace that is peculiarly characteristic of the epoch.

It is not only in the boudoir that you find this wealth of drapery and rich stuffs. The Renaissance bedstead needs a baldaquin of the epoch, a coverlet of the epoch, a valance of the epoch. The upholstered chairs need loose cushions. The carved chimney-piece needs a curtain. Then you need a few pieces of stuff lying round to give color. In short there is an immense demand for embroidered stuffs, and the old Flemish, Florentine, Persian, Indian and other Oriental work fetches immense prices.

In this month the great Parisian drygoods stores organize special exhibitions of these materials for furnishing, at the same time as exhibitions of Oriental carpets. They have agents who scour the East all the year round, and send immense consignments of precious embroideries and a few good carpets, which the Parisian amateurs eagerly buy up. Of modern embroidery and tissues for upholstery, there is a fair show at the Exhibition of Decorative Arts, but it is impossible to describe these objects. The up-

richness of ornamentation of such perfect elegance and charm,—carpets to be paid their weight in gold, for the art, it appears, is dying out. One thing is certain that the majority of Oriental rugs now brought to Paris, are very inferior and unartistic objects. The wool is good, but the dyes are bad, the arrangement of colors bad and the patterns often without local character. The explanation of this falling off is, in the case of the Indian carpets, the interference of the British Government, which after the Exhibition of 1851, introduced carpet making into the Indian jails, and thereby began the ruin of the caste weavers,—the artists who had in their heads and in their fingers the accumulated art feeling and art skill of centuries. The result of this attempt at economy has been the degradation of the Indian carpet manufacture, which will rapidly become extinct. The Lahore Jail turns out annually heaps and heaps of Indian rugs, which are, to an artist's eye, characteristically "jail goods." The public buy them because it is the fashion. The thing is now to get real old Oriental carpets, and to keep hold of them. Even carpets that were made only fifteen or twenty years ago are likely to prove good stock. The Eastern art works will necessarily remain our models, may be to the end of time. In color and taste the Orientals are infinitely superior to the Westerns. Their arms, their stuffs, their saddles, their mats, their pottery, their jewelry are superior to ours in beauty. The whole secret of this superiority is that they have hitherto been artists and not machine-minders.

It does really seem true, when one compares an iron bedstead, a modern door-knob or a modern cane-seated chair, with the equivalent objects produced one, two, or three centuries ago, that in the march of humanity science augments continually, while art degenerates instead of progressing. It goes from Homer to Virgil, and from Virgil to Pope. So in the plastic arts, there are two currents: poetry that sinks and science that rises.

For the benefit of those whom it may interest I may state that with a view to keeping some souvenir of the present retrospective art exhibition,—the most brilliant we have yet had in Paris—the "Union Centrale des Arts Decoratifs" have resolved to publish a series of reports, illustrated with plates and handsomely printed by Quantin. The volume will not be ready until next year. It will contain reports on furniture by M. A. de Champeaux; on stuffs by M. Gaston Le Breton; on printed books and manuscripts by M. Leopold Delisle, of the National Library; on engraving by M. Duplessis; on Oriental art by M. Gasmault; on paper-hanging by M. Poberlet.